The Roman conquest of Dacia: ground-truthing the new airborne LiDAR evidence

João Fonte
Department of Archaeology
University of Exeter
Room 317, Laver Building, North Park Road
EX4 4QE, Exeter, UK
01392 263709
j.fonte2@exeter.ac.uk

The Iron Age capital and main target for Roman conquest during the emperor Trajan’s conquest of Dacia at Sarmizegetusa Regia, together with its surrounding archaeological landscape in the Orăștie Mountains, have been recently subject to an extensive re-examination on the basis of airborne LiDAR data (Oltean & Hanson 2017). The outcomes have potential profound implications to our current understanding of the circumstances and historical significance of Dacia’s conquest. Among other benefits, this survey has enabled the identification of two new Roman camps (on the Șesului and Cornu Pietrii hills), and the re-assessment of the character of the enclosure located on the Muncelu hill and on Sarmizegetusa Regia itself, where besides the Iron Age enclosure, two consecutive Roman fortifications where identified, rendering a more complex picture of the site. This has proposed a re-assessment of the character of the Roman conquest of Dacia by Trajan which contradicts previous interpretations of the real Roman war effort in the Dacian Wars (101–102 and 105-106 AD) and the conquest of its main site and the impact on the indigenous communities, suggesting a deliberate exaggeration for Trajan’s personal public benefit.

Thus, as part of a larger programme focusing on Roman military sites and their relationship with Dacian indigenous settlement, we undertook non-invasive ground-truthing of a relevant sample of new potential archaeological sites and features detected through airborne laser scanning to validate their archaeological significance.

From 15th July until 29th July, in collaboration with Dr Ioana Oltean (University of Exeter) and Dr Gelu Florea (Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca) and his team, we carry out non-invasive fieldwork in the surrounding landscape of Sarmizegetusa Regia. The main part of the fieldwork consisted in site visits, ground-truthing and topographic assessment of the archaeological features that had been previously identified using airborne LiDAR data, mainly several clusters of Dacian terraced open settlements, two new Roman camps and the re-assessment of the enclosure and ancillary features located on the Muncelu hill and on Sarmizegetusa Regia. The fieldwork was focused in three distinct areas: (1) Cornu Pietrii-Varful lui Hulpe; (2) Muncelu Hill; and Sesului Hill. All the proposed archaeological features were archaeologically validated and were recorded through a detailed photographic documentation. We have also did some limited geophysical survey (magnetometer) in the Muncelu hill Roman fort, which presents some unusual external morphological features but connected with the main enclosure, although we had some problems related with the difficult accessibility to the site and the extreme weather conditions at the time of the survey, so we will need to complete the geophysical survey in another occasion.
It is expected that one major publication will result from this project, although no specific plans have been defined yet. A presentation was done by Dr Ioana Otean and Dr João Fonte on the last Limes congress held in Serbia in September 2018 (http://limes2018.org/), were very preliminary results from this project were presented.

The grant was mainly used to support my return travel from Exeter to Cluj-Napoca in Romania (return bus from Exeter to London Luton airport and from there return flight to Cluj-Napoca). Local transportation, meals and accommodation were provided by our Romanian collaborators.

References

Oltean & Hanson 2017: Conquest strategy and political discourse: New evidence for the conquest of Dacia from LiDAR analysis at Sarmizegetusa Regia. Journal of Roman Archaeology, 30, 429-446

Figure 1. The impressive landscape of the Orăștie Mountains as seen from the Muncelu hill.
Figure 2. Geophysical survey (magnetometer) in the Muncelu hill Roman fort.
Figure 3. Visit to Sarmizegetusa Regia. Detail of the sacred area.